DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 276 084 CS 505 429

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TITLE The Risk of Reaching.
PUB DATE Aug 85
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the National Forensic League Conference on the State of Debate (Kansas City, MO, August 8-10, 1985). For related documents, see CS 505 427-428.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Competition; Critical Thinking; *Debate; Educational Objectives; Faculty Advisers; *Persuasive Discourse; *Risk; Skill Development; *Speech Communication; *Teacher Role; Teacher Student Relationship; Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS Thinking Skills

ABSTRACT

One of three related documents exploring the problems inherent to current high school forensic coaching, this paper explores the issue of risk in debate and how this risk can be reduced. The paper first examines how the 'risk of losing' affects coaches and debaters alike, noting that in providing adequate direction by helping to test the evidence as it is collected, the instructors are reducing the risk of reach for their students. The paper then asks whether instructors should go beyond this point, and offers three suggestions for instructors who wish to prepare their students adequately for competition without surrendering more of their own time and without "throwing the students to the ravenous 'evidence gatherers'": (1) stress the pedagogical goals of forensics, (2) emphasize how to recognize and refute logical fallacies and errors in evidence structure, and (3) when dealing with novices, consider a concept that would narrow the parameters of the resolution to a limited number of 'stock' case areas, in order to eliminate the use of more advanced argumentative devices. (HTH)

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The Risk of Reaching

Early summer's balmy stillness brought an eerie tranquility to the battlefield. The heavy guns had fallen silent in mid-afternoon, and the soldiers had settled back for a brief rest before the insanity began again. On the firing step was a private, young in years, but with a face marked with the age of despair and hate. Like the others around him, he was basking in the momentary calm and wistfully remembering happier times and happier faces.

Suddenly his eyes fixed on one of those anomalies of war--a butterfly fluttering through no-man's land and alighting mere inches from his position. Amid the grim signs of war, it was so strange, so out-of-place that the young soldier forgot about the evil around him, forgot that other eyes also scanned the still fields, and slowly inched from his protective cover and reached

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for the elusive, quivering form of a solitary butterfly. The following day the official bulletins from the war zone reported that "All was quiet on the western front." They neglected to mention that one young private, oblivious to the evils surrounding him, had reached for a symbol of his hope, and had fallen victim to a sniper's bullet.[1]

There has always been, in forensics, as well as in all other disciplines which attempt to mold and train young minds, a risk of reach. It is this risk which is prevalent when an instructor recruits young men and women he or she hopes will become some of the devotees of forensic competition. It is this risk which confronts the instructor who must determine when a novice is 'ready' for his first encounter. It is this risk which inheres in the very nature of the activity itself. Likewise, it is this risk which East and Fisher aptly encountered as they wrestled to determine the point at which a forensic instructor sheds his role of 'coach' and dons the garb of a 'participant'.

Exactly how much 'risk' can coaches allow their students to assume? Is it possible for coaches to reduce the 'risk' which confronts their students? Certainly these questions demand answers, but before that can occur, it seems there is another question which must take priority: what are the ultimate ends to be sought from forensic encounters?

Fisher seems to suggest that it is to "bring out the possibilities in the students," that is, to help one reach his or her potential. Ms. East is more specific in outlining her aims for the forensic community. She believes debate should develop,

in the student, the ability to set goals, time-management, self-discipline, self-actualization, organization, the proper use of language, research skills, critical thinking, information processing, an understanding of current issues, and the ability to evaluate and test arguments. Both approaches are certainly consistent with the extant literature as numerous apologetics for forensics will easily attest. One recent defense of the discipline, for instance, argues, "Debate is a tool which serves the individual, contributing to his well-being, his emotional maturity, his placement of priorities."[2] Another contends that "The study of argument benefits both the individual and society. For the individual, the benefits are similar to those claimed for a liberal education. The study of argumentation, like that of all the humanities, offers the potential for human development through growth and interaction with the environment."[3] Others declare, "If we believe that logical factors should prevail in individual and social decisions, then we must have a commitment to training in argumentation."[4]

If these are indeed the ends toward which the debate community will chart its course, and are not mere lip service designed to cloak other, less defensible values, the future of the exercise is bright.

As an adjunct to this discussion, one deficiency should be noted. Nowhere do members of the high school community have available for their use a 'proposed' list of behavioral objectives which they can delineate for their students, their administration, or the educational community. If forensics, in

general, and debate, in particular, is ever to be accepted by the academic establishment, this must be corrected. Since the National Forensic League owes its existence to high school forensics, and as it is the only high school organization with a national constituency in the field, the League should provide a framework in which such guidelines could be developed.

Within this context, both East and Fisher admirably describe the perception that forensic instructors, though accepting the goals described above, nevertheless often inculcate in their charges the belief that winning or placing in tournament competition is, in reality, the end for which they must strive. Both oppose such a practice as does all the available literature on the subject. Still, the feeling is widespread within the community that, admit it or not, the pernicious little objective has found a home in many a program. Some, it seems, truly believe that 'winning' provides the only legitimate way of justifying their program. It is this rationale, or warrant, which drives instructors to 'overcoach', to do research their students need to do for themselves, or to produce numerous little carbon copies of themselves. These instructors seek to minimize the "risk of losing' because they fear that losses by their students in debate rounds will call into question their own competence or threaten a decline in the precious little administrative and academic support they have been able to achieve. The emphasis is on the instructor, not on the students.

And what about the students?

Does the 'risk of losing' affect them? Do they fear that

losses will call into question their competence? Do they believe that, if they are unable to 'bring home the trophies', there will be no valid reason for their remaining on the team? How they answer these questions will reflect the philosophy they see in their instructor.

It is here that instructors find their 'risk of reach'. They realize that their students fear losing for many of the same reasons that coaches fear it. And, because a good coach realizes that he or she "is a 'people' coach as well as a 'debate' coach,"[5] there is a strong desire to see those 'adopted' children succeed and, perhaps, an even more intense drive to help them avoid the stinging barbs of failure. It is a feeling parents face regarding their own children. At what point does one risk allowing children to reach for something on their own? Are there ways the risks of failure can be reduced?

Both Fisher and East allude that such 'avenues of escape' are available when they reason that an instructor should be present with his or her debaters 'in the library" to guide and direct their young minds in valid research techniques. In providing adequate direction by helping to test the evidence as it is collected, the instructors are helping to reduce the risk of reach for their students. But, should instructors go beyond this point?

Interestingly, both papers stop far short of drawing a blanket indictment of coaches who write materials for use by their debaters. Fisher specifically notes the need for much deeper involvement as far as novice debaters are concerned. In

refusing that indictment, both have faced the practices of modern forensics in a realistic manner. The fact is, without disparaging other key components necessary for a balanced secondary education and thereby further weakening the standing of forensics among the academia, no high school student, no matter how gifted, can possibly research all necessary facets of debate resolutions that are so broadly interpreted as those in the modern era. On numerous occasions during the season, good teams will lose key tournament rounds because others have researched, in depth, and area which the former were unable to cover in their already voluminous researches. Even several excellent "researchers" on one team are unable to keep up. And, given the proliferation of books, journals, on-line data bases, and information sources that are now available to the public, it is doubtful that the future can offer any 'natural' respite from such demands. It is not surprising, therefore, that instructors, feeling the need to 'reduce the risk of reach', find themselves as participants in the struggle.

There are, however, other methods of risk reduction that need to be considered and offer some hope for dedicated instructors who wish to adequately prepare their students for competition without surrendering more of their own time and without throwing their students to the ravenous 'evidence gatherers'.

First, coaches can reduce the risk of reach by adequately stressing the pedagogical goals of forensics. By helping students to understand the true goals involved, tournament losses can be somewhat minimized.

Second, coaches can decrease the risk by an intensified emphasis on how to recognize and refute logical fallacies and errors in evidence structure. Many outlined evidence briefs are replete with errors; but most students are unable to recognize them because their instructors were so concerned about 'finding a quote' to defeat an argument that they neglected the rationale or analysis that had been used to legitimatize the material. As one modern text observes, "An effective argument is more than a string of quotations and statistics."[6] By teaching debaters to recognize errors and then expose the reasoning in an effective manner, the instructor has gone a long way in reducing the risks of modern debating.

There are still other steps that might be taken by the forensic community as a whole to assist coaches who wrestle with this problem. Further consideration might be given, for instance, to a concept that would narrow the parameters of the resolution, as far as novices are concerned, to some limited number of 'stock' case areas and which would eliminate, as far as novices are concerned, the use of more advanced argumentative devices like the counterplan. Such a concept might allow coaches the opportunity to spend more time in helping their novices gain insight into analyzing evidence and less time in frantic research. An in-depth understanding of how to logically analyze evidence and arguments should carry over to later years.

Approaches like this are not uncommon in other areas. Sports teams who come together for only short periods prior to the playing of an all-star game are often limited to certain plays

and various 'trick' plays are ruled outside the boundaries of that particular contest. Youth legislatures discourage their youngsters from engaging in trick ploys in order to gain an advantage over their peers.

Such an option would certainly decrease the risks of debate by allowing students to reach their own potentials and by making the element of surprise less of a factor in the novice arena. One other peripheral benefit might be to encourage the development of forensic programs, at least on the novice level, at schools which currently shy away from them because they see the exorbitant demands of current research and because they are unwilling to accept the risks associated with losing.

So, then, there are methods which could allow a conscientious instructor to offset the inherent risks which come to the would-be student of forensics. Theyshould allow coaches to send their charges into battle without denying them "the pleasure of creativity and experimentation" and "the responsibilities leading to independence." They would allow the concerned coach the opportunity of serving as the "first audience" for arguments without being forced into the role of "first author". And, at the same time, the instructor can rest comfortably in the knowledge that he or she has done all that is possible to make the risk of debate acceptable.

In conclusion, it should be noted that this paper does not advocate a rebirth of the past. Debate will never return to what some wistfully remember as "the good 'ole days" of platform oratory where pompous phrases paraded across the floor in hopes

of concealing their dearth of information. Nor does the paper decry the value of research. Good debaters will always be good researchers. And, while it is recognized that there is more to effective debating than research alone, it is also obvious that "advancing claims that lack any evidentiary basis is equally undesirable."[7] At the same time, neither can debate continue to worship blindly at the altar of research. Some day debaters and coaches alike will recognize that an overemphasis on evidence and briefs can never be effective in decreasing the risk of reach.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

[1]Paraphrased from Erich Maria Remarque's All Quiet on the Western Front (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1929).

[2]Glenn Pelham, "Undebatable," in Kenny Barfield, ed., Fifty Golden Years: The NFL Nationals (Florence, AL: Mars Hill Press, 1980), p. 1.

[3]J.W. Patterson and David Zarefsky, Contemporary Debate (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1983), p. 313.

[4]George W. Ziegelmueller and Charles A. Dause, Argumentation: Inquiry and Advocacy (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1975), p. 9.

[5]Pelham, p. 3.

[6]Douglas Ehninger and Wayne Brockriede, Decision by Debate, 2d ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), p. 67.

[7]Ibid., p. 68.